

Mirrors, Dreams, and Memory in *Gringo viejo*

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Los hombres y mujeres de la tropa de Arroyo se miraban a sí mismos. Paralizados por sus propias imágenes, por el reflejo corpóreo de su ser, por la integridad de sus cuerpos. Giraron lentamente, como para cerciorarse de que ésta no era una ilusión más. Fueron capturados por el laberinto de espejos. [...]

Uno de los soldados de Arroyo adelantó un brazo hacia el espejo.

—Mira, eres tú.

Y el compañero señaló hacia el reflejo del otro.

—Soy yo.

—Somos nosotros. (Fuentes, *Gringo viejo* 44-45)

The men and women of Arroyo's troops were looking at themselves. Paralyzed by their own images, by the full-length [corporeal] reflection of their being, by the wholeness of their bodies. They turned slowly, as if to make sure this was not just another illusion. They were caught in the labyrinth of mirrors. [...]

One of Arroyo's soldiers held an arm toward the mirror. 'Look, it's you.'

And his companion pointed toward the reflection in the other mirror. 'It's me.'

'It's us.' (*The Old Gringo* 39-40)¹

Carlos Fuentes's *Gringo viejo* is a house of mirrors in which characters not only see themselves but blend in with others. It is a house where mirrors blend with dreams, into which others enter almost at will. It is a house constructed by memory of such existential crossings—a memory that preserves the times, the frag-



mented consciousnesses of others, in a negotiation of borders between and within selves and between and within countries, namely the United States and Mexico.

One of the most striking images at the beginning of the novel, as we witness a patrol of *villistas* exhuming the body of the Old Gringo, is of this border as “la herida que al norte se abrió como el río mismo desde los cañones despeñados” (16—“the wound that to the north opened like the Rio Grande itself rushing down from steep canyons” [8]). The novel tells of an old gringo and a young gringa who cross that wound into Mexico and of the Revolutionary general they encounter, who invades and changes their lives even as they do his. Each has his or her own wound of divided consciousness.

In a delightful spoof, unfortunately omitted from the translation, Fuentes turns the traditional “Nota del Autor” at the end into a note not on himself but on the Old Gringo, historically authenticating, as it were, the basis of his character at last. Fuentes informs us that the North American writer Ambrose Bierce—“misántropo, periodista [journalist] [...] y autor” (189)—not wanting to die of old age or some debilitating disease, said good-bye to friends and crossed the border into Mexico to provoke his own death, preferably “ante un paredón mexicano” (that is, before the wall used for execution by firing squad). Fuentes quotes Bierce as inscribing a postcard, “Ah [...] ser un gringo en México; eso es eutanasia” (“Ah [...] to be a gringo in Mexico: that is euthanasia”). Bierce entered Mexico in November of 1913 and never returned.² “El resto es ficción,” Fuentes’s fiction, this novel, narrated ostensibly by an omniscient third person but perhaps really by a voice within the consciousness, the memory of the ag-

ing gringa, Harriet Winslow, who sits alone in her Washington, D.C., apartment and remembers her momentous crossing.

The Old Gringo has come to die, yet strangely he has a rebirth of sorts, culminating at the moment of death in a unity of his heretofore divided consciousness. That the Old Gringo has come to die in Mexico is the constant refrain, with incremental repetition: Dying in front of a wall beats falling down stairs; I want to be a good-looking corpse; I seek the gift of nothingness; please grant me the coup de grace. Beyond the bravado lies loss and lament: “Él no le dijo que había venido aquí a morir porque todo lo que amó se murió antes que él” (43—“He did not tell her that he had come here to die because everything he loved had died before him” [37]).

But he does tell her that everything he loved not only died but that he killed it, that he drove his two sons to different forms of suicide, his wife to death after a long illness metonymic of the acrimony between them, his daughter into permanent alienation from him—and all through the bitter cynicism that was his trademark as a journalist. He condemns himself as a born cannibal, even at his mother’s breast. No wonder his family feared he would devour them as well.

His relationship with his father is, if possible, even more complex. As the Old Gringo rides into his first battle with the *villistas*, he reminisces about joining the Union Army just because he dreamed that his father was on the Confederate side and “[q]uería lo que soñó: el drama revolucionario del hijo contra el padre” (58—“he wanted what he dreamed: the revolutionary drama of son against father” [54]). In other words, he seeks the drama of Oedipal rebellion.³ The Old Gringo rides crazily

toward the ensconced *Federales*, like an “espejismo”—a mirror-mirage (59), but sees behind the Mexicans his father’s ghost urging him on: “Haz tu deber, hijo” (60—“Do your duty, son”⁴). Later Arroyo relates to the Old Gringo that when young the corrupt President Porfirio Díaz was a brave revolutionary against the French. The Old Gringo responds,

No, dijo el gringo, no lo sabía: él sólo sabía que los padres se les aparecen a los hijos de noche y a caballo, montados encima de una peña, militando en el bando contrario y pidiéndoles a los hijos:
—Cumplan con su deber. Disparen contra los padres. (79)

No, the gringo said, he hadn’t known. He only knew that fathers appear to their sons at night and on horseback, outlined atop a high cliff, serving in the opposing army and bidding their sons: ‘Carry out your duty. Fire upon your fathers.’ (79)

As is obvious from the mad fixation of this image, the duty the father enunciates has nothing to do with Villa or Huerta and everything to do with the Old Gringo’s ability finally to lay the ghost of his father as every man must in order to be himself, free from an overwhelming superego. After the battle, whether aloud or to himself, the Old Gringo declares triumphantly, “He matado a mi padre” (60—“I have killed my father” [56]). He seems liberated, free at last—to die. Or is it to live again?

The Old Gringo’s bravery does not bring back his wife and children. But even as he muses on the irony of his tracing his father’s very footsteps into Mexico (during the Mexican-American War), now that he has laid his father’s ghost he seems liberated

enough to start falling in love with a woman young enough to be his daughter. From the moment he has seen her, despite his self-destructive purpose, he sees them both as having crossed into Mexico “luchando por ser” (41—“fighting for [their] very being” [35]). He may have thought that ultimate, frozen being would be achieved in a death sought leading a charge against the ghost of his father. But Harriet Winslow awakens in him Electral love that begins with a kiss and the penetration of her dreams by the sheer force of his “deseo” (57—his “desire” [52]). He has hoped that when he returned from the battle, “vivo o muerto, ella lo recibiera en este sueño ininterrumpido” (57—“dead or alive, she would welcome him in this uninterrupted dream” [52]) and that they might “penetrar sus sueños respectivos, compartirlos” (57—“penetrate each other’s dreams, share those dreams” [52-53]):

hizo un esfuerzo gigantesco, como si éste pudiese ser el último acto de su vida, y en un instante soñó con los ojos abiertos y los labios apretados el sueño entero de Harriet [...].

—Estoy muy sola.

—Puede usted tomarme cuando guste.

—¿... te viste en el espejo...? (57)

He made a tremendous effort, as if this might be the last act of his life, and in an instant he dreamed with open eyes and clenched lips Harriet’s entire dream [...].

‘I am very lonely.’

‘You may have me at your pleasure.’

‘... did you look at yourself in the mirror...?’ (53)

These fragments from Harriet’s dream will become clearer. For now, suffice it to say

that they are expressions of her intimate desires, desires the Old Gringo has penetrated through an enormous act of his own desire, a will-to-being already countering his death-wish. That he fails to recognize, to acknowledge the nature of his desire is perhaps underscored by the reference to Harriet's looking at herself in the mirror as the two of them entered the ballroom earlier that night: the Old Gringo did not look in the mirror either, because "sólo tuvo los ojos para miss Harriet" (44—"he had eyes only for Miss Harriet" [39]).

The night of his victory over his father, the Old Gringo watches Harriet and Arroyo together and closes his eyes in fear, for he sees them as "un hijo y una hija" (63—"a son and a daughter" [60]) and he is afraid again to get involved, to have love in his life. Yet even his metaphors and abstractions employed to distance himself from the nature of his desire ooze with sexuality: "ambos nacidos del semen de la imaginación que se llama poesía y amor" (63—"both born of the seed [semen, sperm] of the imagination called poetry and love" [60]).

The poetic form the Old Gringo's love takes is intercourse, or interpenetration through dreams: "Quizás la podría visitar en sueños. Quizás la mujer que entró al salón de baile la noche anterior no se vio a sí misma, pero sí se soñó" (77—"Maybe he could visit her dreams. Maybe the woman who entered the ballroom the previous evening had not looked at herself, but had dreamed herself" [77]). After the Old Gringo's second victorious battle they meet again in a mirror in the railway car that serves as Arroyo's quarters. The Old Gringo tells Harriet, "Creo que hasta soñé contigo. Me sentí tan cerca de ti como un..." (99—"I think I even dreamed about [with] you. I felt as close to you as a..." [103]). Harriet's

response is devastating: "¿Como un padre?" (99—"As a father?" [103]). He kisses her on the cheek; they embrace; her blouse is not fully buttoned. It is an erotic moment, full of possibilities. Yet abruptly there in the doorway is Arroyo, who, naked to the waist, smokes a big black cigar and watches them as they go to join the village festival. When Harriet misses the pearls she has discovered in the hacienda and is about to accuse Arroyo's people, he appears again, still half naked, strapping on twin holsters (a sign of his potency) and seizing Harriet by the wrist to show her the error of her ways: that the pearls have been used to deck the Virgin during the festival. Harriet appeals to the Old Gringo,

[...] pero él supo que su tiempo con esta muchacha había llegado y se había ido, aunque ella todavía tuviera tiempo de anidarse en brazos de él y quererlo como mujer o como hija, no importaba, ya era demasiado tarde: vio la cara de Arroyo, el cuerpo de Arroyo, la mano de Arroyo y se dio por vencido. Su hijo y su hija. (102)

[...] but he knew his moment with this woman had come and gone; she might still have time to nestle in his arms and to love him as a wife or a daughter, it didn't matter; it was too late; he saw Arroyo's face, Arroyo's body, Arroyo's hand, and he surrendered. His son and his daughter. (106)

She would not be his lover. He relinquishes her to the role of daughter, lover to this surrogate son.

So the Old Gringo yields his quasi-incestuous desire to the quasi-incestuous desire of Tomás Arroyo. His liberation has been short-lived. If he has laid the ghost of

his father, he has not laid the ghosts of his two sons, who have been denied their Oedipal struggle, and now displaced Oedipal jealousy between pseudo-father and pseudo-son interrupts the Old Gringo's new dream and spells his doom. For Arroyo has watched the Old Gringo and Harriet kiss and embrace, and now he supplants this father, this gringo. Before the Old Gringo even knows (except perhaps in his sympathetic imagination) that Harriet has yielded to Arroyo in order to save his life, the Old Gringo sees himself and Arroyo as "enemigo[s]" (115—"enemies" [120]), as Arroyo

[...] se paseaba como un gallito para dar a entender que la gringa era suya, se había desquitado así de los chingados gringos, ahora Arroyo era el macho que se cogió a la gringa y lavó con una eyaculación rápida las derrotas de Chapultepec y Buenavista. (115)

[...] was strutting like a cock to let him know the American woman was his, he had got the best of the fucking gringos, now he, Arroyo, the macho, had fucked the American woman and with one quick ejaculation washed away the defeats of [the Mexicans at the hands of the Americans in the Mexican-American War at] Chapultepec and Buenavista. (120)

Walking with her the morning after her night of love-making with Arroyo, the Old Gringo's fragmented consciousness comes to realize that love, without which (or at least without the imagination of which) humans cannot live, finally—for both of them, for all of us—"nos da la medida de nuestra pérdida" (134—"gives us the measure of our loss" [140]). His love for her, her love for Arroyo—both measure

lost opportunities of being and becoming. He laments her loss, especially because, he tells her, she was loved without even knowing it—in the thousand fragments of his "sueños" ("dreams"), in the very "espejos" ("mirrors") through which she had entered "a un sueño olvidado" ("a forgotten dream") (135 [140-41]). The dream is forgotten now because its possibility is past, unrealized, obliterated by the Old Gringo's "verdadera violencia" (135—"real fury" [140]) at their dual betrayal of him: not only had Arroyo taken her for his vanity, she had enjoyed it.

Realizing that each had been creating the other as both a product and a project of their imaginations, that she had been the final answer to the "loco sueño del artista con la conciencia dividida" (140—"the mad dream of the artist with a split consciousness" [146]), the Old Gringo, as he gathers his thoughts at the critical instant before he will seek revenge on Arroyo, nevertheless achieves a final intercourse of consciousness with Harriet, as they walk "sacralizando estos minutos en los que ambos lograron unir su conciencia dividida en la del otro: antes de la dispersión final que adivinaban" (141—"sanctifying those minutes when they succeeded in uniting—each in the other's—their split consciousness, before the final dispersion they sensed was near" [148]).

There is nothing traditionally transcendent about the Old Gringo's final consciousness, for "siempre la muerte y la ignorancia al cabo de todo, siempre la paz muda e insensible de la inexistencia y la inconsciencia al final" (144—"in the end, it's always death and unawareness, always the mute and insentient peace of nonexistence and unconsciousness" [162]). As in Faulkner's novels (especially *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*), memory provides the only tran-

scendence of time. The Old Gringo achieves a final unity of consciousness, enabled by the unexpected: by Harriet Winslow, by Mexico itself, which has awakened his sensitivity to the natural world:

Su conciencia errante, cercana a la unidad final, le dijo que ésta era la gran compensación por los amores perdidos porque mereció perderlos; México, en cambio, le había dado la compensación de una vida: la vida de los sentidos despertada de su letargo por la cercanía de la muerte, la dignidad de la naturaleza como la última alegría de la vida. (139)

His ranging⁵ consciousness, close to final unity, told him that this was the great compensation for the loves he had lost because he deserved to lose them. Mexico had, instead, compensated him with a life: the life of his senses, awakened from lethargy by his proximity to death, the dignity of nature as the last joy of his life. (146)

Together, then, Harriet and Mexico have vouchsafed the Old Gringo an invaluable gift—a unified consciousness enabled by the old body itself. The Old Gringo reflects back on his crossing into Mexico and reinterprets it:

Se sintió liberado al cruzar la frontera en Juárez, como si de verdad hubiera entrado a otro mundo. Ahora sí sabía que existía una frontera secreta dentro de cada uno y que ésta era la frontera más difícil de cruzar, porque cada uno espera encontrarse allí, solitario dentro de sí, y sólo descubre, más que nunca, que está en compañía de los demás.

Dudó por un instante y luego dijo:
—Esto es inesperado. Es atemorizante. Es doloroso. Y es bueno. (143)

He had felt freed the moment he crossed the border at Juárez, as if he had walked into a different world. Now he was sure: each of us has a secret frontier within him, and that is the most difficult frontier to cross because each of us hopes to find himself alone there, but finds only that he is more than ever in the company of others.

He hesitated for an instant and then added: 'This is unexpected. It's terrifying. It's painful. And it's good.' (161)

The Old Gringo's final unity of consciousness, then, his final becoming, creates not the radical self of bourgeois ideology but an interimplicated self, penetrating and co-created by the consciousnesses of others, kept alive only in the memory of others who have shared one's *tiempo*, one's time.

Yet the Old Gringo's final act is violent, vengeful, parricidal. He kills Arroyo's ancestors by burning the papers that prove his people's claim to the land. Furious, Arroyo of course kills the Old Gringo in return, granting him the death he has sought. Ironically, this destruction of a sacred link to the past may itself be strangely liberating. For it not only implicates Arroyo in the Gringo's death and consequently in his own death but interimplicates his people in a consciousness that reaches beyond their comfortable confines:

[N]unca conocimos a nadie fuera de esta comarca, no sabíamos que existía un mundo fuera de nuestros maizales, ahora conocemos a gente venida de todas partes, cantamos juntos las canciones, soñamos juntos los sueños y discutimos si éramos más felices solos en nuestros pueblos o ahora volando por aquí revueltos con tantos sueños y tantas canciones diferentes[.] (145-46)

We never knew anyone outside this region, we didn't know there was a world beyond our maize fields, now we know people from all parts, we sing our songs together, we dream our dreams together and argue whether we were happier isolated in our villages or now, whirling around everywhere, dizzied by so many dreams and so many different songs. (163-64)

The final "dispersion" of death for the Old Gringo means insemination: of the memory of both Harriet and the Mexican people. Moreover, the burning of the papers breaks an umbilical cord to the unrecoverable past and catapults if not Arroyo himself at least Mexico into the future.

In a fine scene very unfortunately omitted from the translation, Pancho Villa explains to La Luna, the moon-faced mistress of Tomás Arroyo, who knew Villa when he was only a rustler named Doroteo Arango, why he has left home:

—Usted dejó su casa. Yo dejé la mía.
 —Tú no tenías casa, Doroteo Arango.
 —Pero ahora soy Francisco Villa y los persigo a ellos por violar hermanas y asesinar padres. Nunca he hecho nada que no sea por la justicia. Ellos me quitaron mi casa. [...] La revolución es ahora nuestro hogar. (171)

'You left your house. I left mine.'
 'Thou didst not have a house,
 Doroteo Arango.'

'But now I am Francisco Villa and I pursue those who violate sisters and assassinate fathers. Never have I done anything that was not for justice. They took my house from me. [...] The Revolution is now our home.'⁶

Villa's response is fraught with ironies: those who violate sisters and who assassinate fathers are not *unheimlich* others; they are right here at home in Villa's own family, especially in the figure of Tomás Arroyo. Moreover, Arroyo commits the fatal mistake of trying to go home again.

After meeting the Old Gringo at the beginning of the novel, Arroyo returns to the Miranda hacienda where he was engendered and raised, a bastard of Señor Miranda himself. He burns it to the ground—except for its ballroom, its hall of mirrors. He insists that he is motivated by the cause of justice in the face of *hacendado* oppression of the *mestizos* of northern Mexico, an oppression that leaves these mixed people only three choices: disappear among the Indians, become midnight *bandidos*, or submit to a life of virtual forced labor on the haciendas. Arroyo insists he has chosen rebellion so that the next generation will not be limited to these horrible alternatives: "He regresado para que nadie en México tenga que repetir mi vida o escoger como yo tuve que escoger" (131—"I have come back so that no one ever again has [to repeat my life or to choose as I have had to] in Mexico" [137]).

Yet the General doth insist too much. His inability to burn the hall of mirrors and rejoin Villa reveals that he is trapped in his own dreams: of Oedipal assassination and Oedipal supplantation of the father in his mother's bed. After grabbing Harriet by the wrist, Arroyo drags her to the ballroom,

[...] y detrás de una puerta de espejos salió Tomás Arroyo un niño a bailar con su madre, su madre la esposa legítima de su padre, su madre la señora limpia y derecha [...] que bailaba con su hijo el vals *Sobre las olas*

que tantas veces oyeron desde lejos, en el caserío donde podían vedarse las miradas pero no los rumores de la música. (106)

[...] and from behind a door of mirrors the boy Tomás Arroyo came out to dance with his mother, his mother, his father's legitimate wife, his mother, the straight and clean woman [...] [who] danc[ed] with her son the waltz *Sobre las olas* that they had heard so often far away in the big house, where they could keep out prying eyes but could not keep in the sounds of the music. (110)

Arroyo's desire from the time he was a young boy to legitimate his mother and thus himself, to displace his father in the arms of his mother and dance with her in the palacial ballroom has been fulfilled, as it were, in a waking dream.

As Arroyo's desire for Harriet increases, however, the narrator says, "Arroyo había abandonado a su madre decente y respetada" (109—"Arroyo [...] had abandoned his decent and respectable mother [113]). But we are denied insight into his consciousness and have only Harriet's observation: "Harriet vio a Arroyo saliendo entre las piernas de todas las mujeres cargadas de pesares y sombras: asombradas, apesadumbradas" (109—"Harriet saw Arroyo pushing out from between the legs of all women burdened by cares and shadows [astonished, nightmare-stricken]" [113]). It is a double image. Arroyo's mother will not remain fixed in his dream-fantasy as his father's legitimate wife, dancing with her son-husband. She is all the oppressed women of Mexico, both giving birth to and copulating with Arroyo, El Libertador, the Revolution itself.

Even this last image is complicated.

Arroyo tells how as a child he was taken up to the big house by Graciano, the trusted old servant who had access to the keys of the house so he could wind the clock, among other things. When Graciano let Arroyo hold the keys for a minute, a minute in which he felt he held the house and all its inhabitants in his power, Señor Miranda seemed to sense the threat and immediately ordered Graciano to take the keys back from the little "mocoso" (126—"snotty] brat" [132]). On his deathbed, Graciano transmitted to Arroyo the box with the sacred papers in it, the land grants from the King of Spain proving the people owned the land. Graciano, as it were, designates Arroyo the heir to his ruthless father's estate.

This story relates to the last story Arroyo tells Harriet on their night of love-making—a story we get only in Harriet's final reminiscences. Arroyo begins the story announcing his father was shot trying to rape an Indian woman in Yucatán, where he was visiting an *hacendado* whose wealth came from enforced Indian labor on his maguery plantation. But as he tells the story, Arroyo's wish-fulfillment seems to penetrate. Instead of being shot, the old man is murdered, assassinated by being forced, by the Indian woman's lover, to swallow keys until he strangles to death. It is a grotesque, distorted image of Oedipal fellatio rape. The old man is then hung by his scrotum in a well until his flesh rots off his bones—imagery that recalls Arroyo's earlier narration to Harriet that he had refused to look into his dying father's eyes but instead had waited to see his denuded bones.

The lover is thus a twin for Arroyo, whom he hopes the Revolution will allow him to meet as north meets south. But Arroyo is also a twin for his father and the Indian woman a twin for his mother. Arroyo's grotesque image of his father wip-

ing blood off his penis after raping the Indian woman mingles with Harriet's earlier image of Arroyo's emerging from the loins of the oppressed, for the old man was "imaginando que se estaba cogiendo en una virgen a todas las mujeres de México" (184—"imagining he was fucking, in one virgin girl, all the women of Mexico" [194]). Arroyo curses his father and wishes he had been there with the couple. His hesitation in the naming of the couple reveals his Oedipal anxiety:

[A]h viejo cabrón, cómo lo detesto y cómo deseo haber estado allí cuando esa pareja de jóvenes, una pareja como yo y... y... carajo, no como tú, miss Harriet, maldita seas, ni como La Luna tampoco, chingada sea, la última muchacha que mi padre se cogió jamás no era como ninguna mujer que yo haya tenido nunca, chingada seas gringa, nadie como esa mujer, digo chingada seas gringa y chingada sea La Luna y chingadas sean todas las viejas que no se parecen a mi madre que es la melliza de la última mujer que mi chingado padre tuvo jamás. (184)

[O]h the fucking bastard, how I hate him and how I wish I had been there when this young couple, a couple like me and... and... and... God damn it, not you Miss Harriet, damn you, [...] not like La Luna either, oh, damn it [may she be fucked], that last girl my father ever had is like no woman I have ever had, oh, damn you [may you be fucked], gringa, no one like that other woman, I say damn you [may you be fucked] and damn La Luna [may she be fucked] and [may they be fucked] all the other women [all the old hags] who do not resemble my own mother, who is the twin sister of the last

woman my damned [fucking] father ever had. (195)

Arroyo's obscene rage at these other women, his calling all other women, including by implication all the ones he has had and the one in his current bed, "viejas," is a screen to obscure his Oedipal desire to violate, through this surrogate sister, her twin his mother, and to assassinate his father, his own double—a final desire that yields his own death-wish. In shooting his rival the Old Gringo, his pseudo-father who is in the castrating act of destroying Arroyo's inheritance, his potency as the new Miranda, Arroyo displaces Oedipal assassination and brings about his own death at the hands of the avenging woman.

Arroyo has tried to go home, where he could negotiate his Oedipal crisis. But instead of finally being associated with his mother and through her with the oppressed of Mexico, he has become enchanted, as he explains to Harriet, transfixed before the castrating image of his father (the hacienda itself, its mirrors, which Fuentes describes in a telling image as "una esfera de navajas que corta por donde se la tome" [105—"a sphere of blades that cuts wherever it is grasped" (109)]). Harriet pronounces the final condemnation: he wanted his dream of avenging his mother to become a reality, but instead,

—[...] [T]u nombre no es Arroyo como tu madre; te llamas Miranda como tu padre: sí—le dijo mientras la lluvia dispersaba las cenizas de papel—, eres su heredero resentido, disfrazado de rebelde. Pobre bastardo. Eres Tomás Miranda. (165)

'Your name isn't Arroyo, like your mother's; your name is Miranda, af-

ter your father. Yes,' she said, as the rain dissolved the ashes of the papers, 'you're the resentful heir, disguised as a rebel. You poor bastard. You are Tomás Miranda.' (175)⁸

Harriet speaks these lines as Arroyo is about to be executed by Villa. Arroyo shot the Old Gringo in the back as he was leaving the railway car with the burning papers in his hand. Harriet has told United States officials that a *villista* general has assassinated an American in Mexico and thereby created an international incident, bad press which Villa cannot afford. So he orders the Old Gringo exhumed, shot from the front by a firing squad in front of that wall after all, and as Arroyo administers the coup de grace on the Old Gringo, Villa has him executed as well, administering the coup de grace on Arroyo himself—a father figure punishing a wayward son: “Tomasito. [...] Ya sabes que tú eres como mi hijo” (167—“Tomasito [a diminutive showing affection]. [...] You know [thou knowest] you're [thou art] like a son to me” [177]).

Yet ironically, Villa has managed to grant Arroyo a final being, essence. As the Old Gringo had predicted, Arroyo would only escape the inevitable corruption of power by dying young. As Harriet has said, “Lo más importante de la vida de Arroyo no iba a ser cómo vivió, sino cómo murió” (114—“The most important thing in Arroyo's life would be not how he lived, but how he died” [119]). Villa has given him “la victoria del héroe” (187—“a hero's victory” [199]).

Of course, the text reminds us that the agent in Arroyo's death is not so much Villa as Harriet: “Sin embargo Harriet Winslow sabía [...] que no dañó a Arroyo, sino que le dio la victoria del héroe” (187—“And yet Harriet Winslow knew [...] that

she had not harmed Arroyo but given him a hero's victory” [199]). Harriet kills him partly to avenge his killing the Old Gringo, partly to avenge his showing her the possibility of being she could never become.

If Harriet Winslow, like the Old Gringo, has come to Mexico “luchando de ser”—wrestling for her being—then like the Old Gringo and Tomás Arroyo she has a ghost to lay. Her struggle for being involves escaping from spinsterhood in subsistence living with her mother in Washington, D.C., supported only by pension checks for her father, who disappeared in Cuba and who is presumed dead (though Harriet knows better). It involves, too, escaping from her beau, Mr. Delaney, a lobbyist in Congress, whose idea of a good time is having Harriet masturbate him through his clothes. Harriet decides to leave for a teaching job at the Miranda estate even before Delaney is indicted for fraud. But she is also running away to a dry climate from the insufferable humidity of the Potomac—and the tumescent sensuality associated with it, especially in the figure of her father's Negro mistress.

“Era una mujer que soñaba mucho” (52—“She was a woman who dreamed a lot” [48])—of her father, of his mistress, sometimes substituting herself obliquely for the mistress, as when a detached voice announces, “Capitán Winslow, estoy muy sola y usted puede tomarme cuando guste” (55—“Captain Winslow, I am very lonely. You may have me at your pleasure” [51]). Was it Delaney or her father who appeared old and tired without his starched Arrow collar? Was it in or out of a dream? Which one said women can be only “putas o vírgenes” (55—“sluts or virgins” [51])?

Entering Mexico Harriet enters the Miranda hacienda, the ballroom with its mirrors. But perhaps she didn't look at her-

self in the mirrors, muses the Old Gringo, because "sí se soñó" (77—she "had dreamed herself" [77]). It is not only the Old Gringo who penetrates her dreams. The day after she arrives, after she has tried, out of a sense of duty, to put what she can in order on the ruined hacienda, she has a humid dream about when she was happiest, assuming the duty that everything depended on her:

Pero algo faltaba en el sueño. Había algo más, sin lo cual el simple deber no bastaba. Trató de invitar a otro sueño dentro de su sueño, una luz, un patio trasero regado de pétalos de cornejo caídos, un quejido desde lo hondo de un pozo. (94)

But something was lacking in her dream. There was something more, something without which simple duty was not enough. She tried to invoke a different dream within her dream, a light, a back yard strewn with fallen dogwood blossoms, a moan from a black pit. (97)

The moan is the cry of sensuality, the cry of the Negro mistress from her dark pit, the cellar where she met her father. Harriet wants what the black woman experiences: passion, orgasm, her father. As she dances with Arroyo in the hall of mirrors, she fantasizes, "*bailo con mi padre que regresó condecorado de Cuba*" (105—"I am dancing with my father, just back from Cuba [a decorated hero]" [109]). She buries her nose in his neck and "olía a sexo erizado y velludo de una negra: Capitán Winslow, estoy muy sola y usted puede tomarme cuando guste" (106—"smelled a Negress's swollen, velvety sex: Captain Winslow, I am very lonely, you may have me at your pleasure" [109-10]). Arroyo senses her incestuous desire (which only matches his) and asks cruelly, after she

has given herself to him to save the Old Gringo, what she really wants, "¿Tener un padre como el gringo viejo, o ser como su padre con Arroyo?" (116—"To have a father like the old gringo, or to be like her father with Arroyo?" [122]). She begs him to unsay what he has just said, for he has uncovered not just her incestuous desire but her gender duplicity: in her dreams and mirrors.

Turmoil seizes Harriet from her dream that afternoon before she can order her conscious self. One of the *soldaderas*, La Garduña, desperately needs Harriet's help to save her asphixiating baby. Harriet is half in, half out of dream, seeing herself as the child. She can only save the baby with her body, with a sympathetic abjection that leads her to suck the phlegm out of the child: "mi cuerpo dijo Harriet: cuándo bañaré mi cuerpo, cuándo lo podré lavar, vengo cargando mugre y muerte, muerte y sueño" (95—" [m]y body, Harriet thought: when shall I bathe my body, when will I be able to wash, I'm covered with filth and death, death and dream" [98]). Miraculously, the child is saved, born again. Still in a kind of dream state, Harriet thinks of spanking the child, knocking out the phlegm, but then goes on to spank sadistically:

Yo sentí un gusto enorme en azotarla. La salvé con cólera. Yo no tuve hijos. Pero a esta niña yo la salvé. Me cuesta descubrir el amor en lo que no me es familiar. Lo concibo y lo protejo como un gran misterio. (97)

I enjoyed spanking her. My anger saved her. I never had children. But I saved the child. It's difficult for me to find love in what I don't know. I conceive and protect love like a great mystery. (100)

Then she thinks ahead to when she will tell Arroyo, “Yo no tendré hijos” (97—“I will never have children” [100]).

The dream-memory of the armpit and crotch smell and sperm and vaginal juices of her father and his mistress and now the near-dream experience of the child and the phlegm and the muck and the mire and the spanking and the accompanying sadistic pleasure and secret hatred of children—all represent the abject, as feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva describes it (*Powers of Horror*), and it is related to what Sigmund Freud in his later work called the reality principle (e.g. *The Ego and the Id* 15). It is what she can experience only through the body, as in her scream of passion, of glory at orgasm:

[S]e vino con un gemido intolerable, un gran gemido animal que no hubiese tolerado en nadie más, un suspiro pecaminoso de placer que desafiaba a Dios, [...] un grito de amor que le anunció al mundo que esto era lo único que valía la pena hacer, tener, saber, nada más en este mundo, nada sino este instante entre el otro instante que nos dio vida y el instante final que nos la quitó para siempre: entre ambos momentos, déjame sólo este momento, rogó[.] (185)

She came with an unbearable groan, a great animal moan she would have tolerated in no one, a sinful sigh of pleasure that was God-defying, [...] a scream of love that told the world that this was the only thing worth doing, worth having, worth knowing, nothing else in the world, nothing else but this instant between that other instant that gave us birth and that final instant that took our life away forever. Between these two moments, let me have only this mo-

ment, she prayed[.] (196)

She prays, but pro forma. For the glory she has experienced gains its great value because it is God-defying: it defies organized religion, metaphysics. It recognizes that behind the masks of heroism and glory, “cuando al cabo ambas se desenmascaraban y mostraban sus verdaderas facciones,” there is only “la muerte” (170—“when [...] both were finally unmasked to show their true features: those of death” [180]). In the bodies of the dead soldiers, eaten by pigs, she sees Mantegna’s Christ, a vision of clotted snot and matted blood and hair that showed “que la muerte no era noble sino baja, no serena sino convulsiva, no prometadora sino irrevocable e irredenta” (181—“that death was not noble but base, not serene but convulsive, not promising but irrevocable, unredeemable” [191-92]). It is the vision of Arroyo’s father’s bones Harriet asks him about:

¿Tú sabes cuánto tiempo toma para que [...] la esencia absoluta de nuestra eternidad sobre la tierra aparezca, Arroyo, cuánto tiempo, sobre todo, para que toleremos la visión no sólo de lo que hemos de ser sino de la eternidad en la tierra como es de verdad, sin cuentos de hadas, sin fe en el espíritu o esperanza de resurrección? (179)

How long, do you know, does it take [...] for the sheer essence of our eternity on earth to appear, Arroyo, how long, above all, for us to tolerate the sight not only of what we shall be but of eternity on earth as it truly is, without fairy tales, without faith in the spirit or acceptance of the resurrection? (189)

What Harriet discovers through the abject component of the body, of love, of exist-

ence, then, is the oxymoron of existential metaphysics, the metaphysics of the desert:

Se encontraba en el desierto mexicano, hermano del Sáhara y del Gobi, continuación del Arizona y el Yuma, espejos del cinturón de esplendores estériles que ciñe al globo como para recordarle que las arenas frías, los cielos ardientes y la belleza yerma, esperan alertas y pacientes para volver a apoderarse de la Tierra desde su vientre mismo: el desierto. (22)

He was deep in the Mexican desert, sister to the Sahara and the Gobi, continuation of the Arizona and Yuma deserts, mirror of the belt of sterile splendors girdling the globe as if to remind it that cold sands, burning skies, and barren beauty wait patiently and alertly to again overcome the earth from its very womb: the desert. (15)

The desert: the ultimate abject underlying all other metaphysics. Harriet's primal scream at the glorious, excruciating moment of *la petite mort* gains its great value through its bodily, material link with death itself.

The novel begins and ends with the repeated statement that Harriet would never forgive Arroyo for showing her what she could be, knowing she would never become it, she would return home. At first we may think the novel means that Harriet could never surrender her Protestant, puritan self to the eroticism of La Luna, of a Mexican woman. But perhaps what Arroyo's love and sex with Harriet have revealed is just this existential metaphysics of nothingness beyond birth, death, the glory of passion that cannot abide.

So why does Harriet kill Arroyo? The Old Gringo senses she has changed forever

after sex with Arroyo, after her moment of terrific orgasm: "su hija cambió entre los brazos y entre las piernas de su hijo" (141—"his daughter changed in the arms and between the legs of his son" [147]). He recognizes that she contains her own fire within. So if she is changed and fulfilled, why kill Arroyo? She does not actually pull the trigger, but she knew the consequences when she complained to the U.S. authorities: "cuando reclamó el cuerpo del gringo viejo a sabiendas de las consecuencias" (170—"when she demanded the old gringo's body, knowing what the consequences would be" [180]). She reminisces that willing his death was her only lapse in compassion. So why?

At one point the narrator says Harriet will never forgive Arroyo because he made her admit she liked their love-making. The Old Gringo thinks that, because she has said that Arroyo had no right to her body and that she will make him pay, "Harriet no admitía testigos vivientes de su sensualidad y que ella le daba al viejo el derecho de soñar con ella, pero no a Arroyo" (142—"Harriet would [did] not allow a living testimony to her sensuality, that she was giving the old man the right to dream about her, but not Arroyo" [149]). But he may have it wrong, for he himself was not a witness to their intimacies. After their second love-making, apparently after her cataclysmic orgasm, Fuentes describes the fire in her that lay smoldering, that was her fire, not Arroyo's, rooted in her American experience. Strangely, she pictures Arroyo in stereotypes she shared with her mother of bullfighters, opera singers with macho arrogance, an arrogance she now attacks by taking his tumescent penis in her mouth and turning the tables on him, as if she were penetrating him, could bite him off. It is an image of the desire for control, for power over him as he had had power

over her. But he refuses to submit to her power, refuses to come in her mouth, and she curses him:

[M]aldito negándose a fruncirse y declararse vencido, negándose a admitir que en la boca de la mujer él era el cautivo de la mujer, pero otra vez haciéndola sentir que antes sabría estrangularla, antes de venirse y encogerse y dejarla a ella saborear su victoria. (133)

[D]amn him, refusing to shrink and be beaten, refusing to acknowledge that in her mouth [in the mouth of the woman] he was her captive [the captive of the woman], but again making her feel that she would throttle first [he could strangle her] before he ever came and shrank and let her savor victory. (139)

Because she cannot subdue him, at least co-equally sharing dominance, she spits him out with a guttural sound

mientras ella gritaba ¿qué te pasa, qué te hace ser como eres, chingada verga prieta, qué te hace negarle a una mujer un momento tan terrible y poderoso como el que antes tomaste para ti? (133)

as she screamed what is it with you, what makes you what you are, you damned brown prick, what makes you refuse a woman a moment as free [terrifying] and powerful as the one you took before? (139)

It is this radical denial of her subjectivity, this perpetuation of her as object that Harriet cannot abide: “Y por esto Harriet Winslow nunca perdonó a Tomás Arroyo” (133—“And, for this, Harriet Winslow never forgave him” [139]). Because he gave

her an image of the subjective being she could be and then denied it her.

Furthermore, Arroyo compounded his crime: he killed the site of her precious intersubjectivity, the Old Gringo, in whose consciousness the three of them met:

Arroyo sabía bien el nombre de la persona que reclamaba el cuerpo. La vio en sus sueños mientras arrullaba la cabeza muerta del viejo entre sus manos y lo miraba a él de pie a la salida del carro como si hubiera matado algo que le pertenecía a ella pero también a él, y ahora los dos estaban de nuevo solos, huérfanos, mirándose con odio, incapaces ya de alimentarse el uno al otro a través de una criatura viva y de colmar las ausencias angustiadas que ella sentía en ella y él en él. (165)

Arroyo knew full well the name of the person who was claiming the body. He saw her in his dreams, with the old man's blasted head in her arms, looking at Arroyo standing in the door of the railroad car, as if he had killed something that belonged to her, but also to him; and now they were both alone again, orphans, looking at each other with hatred, no longer capable of nourishing each other through a living creature, or of filling the tormented void that she felt in herself and he in him. (174)

Arroyo has orphaned them both—again, for each has been abandoned by a father, forsaken by a mother, if only metaphorically. Arroyo has committed a form of parricide.

Yet if the Old Gringo is right that the last frontier, the one we cross at night, brings us to the realization that we are not all alone, then he and Harriet are not orphaned in solitary confinement. If Harriet can overcome the hatred she struggles with as we

witness her reminiscing at the beginning of the novel, it will be through memory, the final “hogar” (124), one to which a person can go “home” (129). Harriet can negotiate this final crossing by generating a

[...] nueva compasión que, precisamente en virtud de ese pecado, le fue otorgada, ella se la debía a un joven revolucionario mexicano que ofrecía vida y a un viejo escritor norteamericano que buscaba muerte: ellos le dieron existencia suficiente a su cuerpo para vivir los años por venir, aquí en los Estados Unidos, allá en México, dondequiera[.] (170)

[...] new compassion granted her precisely by virtue of that sin [of causing Arroyo’s death], she owed to a young Mexican revolutionary who offered life and to an old American writer who sought death: they had given her enough life to live for many years, here in the United States, there in Mexico, anywhere at all[.] (180)

The translation misses the fact that this sufficient existence has been granted to Harriet’s body (“a su cuerpo”), to her material being.

Through the materiality of her memory, Harriet must try to negotiate the Border, to turn it from the wound, the “cicatriz” Inocencio still sees it as when he delivers Harriet and the coffin carrying the Old Gringo to the Border crossing (175—“scar” [185]). When the American journalist asks her if she doesn’t want to see the U.S. civilize and democratize Mexico, she responds with verve, “No, no, yo quiero aprender a vivir con México, no quiero salvarlo” (177—“No! No! I want to learn to live with Mexico, I don’t want to save it” [187]), wanting to say further,

que lo importante era vivir con México a pesar del progreso y la democracia, y que cada uno llevaba adentro su México y sus Estados Unidos, su frontera oscura y sangrante que sólo nos atrevemos a cruzar de noche: eso dijo el gringo viejo. (177)

that what mattered was to live with Mexico in spite of progress and democracy, that each of us carries his Mexico and his United States within him, a dark and bloody frontier we dare to cross only at night: that’s what the old gringo had said. (187)

She tries to yell to Inocencio and Pedrito across the river that she had accomplished Arroyo’s desire: to die young and to bequeath to her “*su tiempo, mantenerlo ahora*” (177—“*his time, [in order to] safeguard it for him*” [187]). They did not hear her shout, as the bridge burst into flames (cf. the Old Gringo’s initial crossing), “He estado aquí. Esta tierra ya nunca me dejará” (177—“I have been here. This land will always be a part of me [will never leave me]” [187]). She refuses to burn bridges.

All Arroyo wanted the gringos to say when they returned from Mexico was:

—He estado aquí. Esta tierra ya nunca me dejará. Eso es lo que les pido a los dos. Palabra de honor: es lo único que quiero. No nos olviden. Pero sobre todo, sean nuestros sin dejar de ser ustedes, con una chingada. (108)

‘I have been here. This land will always be a part of me now.’ That’s what I ask of them. I swear: it’s the only thing I ask. Don’t forget us. But, more than anything, be us and still be yourself[ves]... and fuck it all [this time I would avoid the literal and translate, ‘for chrissake’]. (113)

Be us without ceasing to be yourselves. Now that Bierce and his friends in San Francisco have toasted the end of Manifest Destiny, it is time to turn to this “más extraña siendo la más próxima” (176—this “strangest, because it was the closest” [186]), most dangerous when most forgotten of borders. The United States has killed its “pieles rojas” (77—“Redskins” [76]); it seems to be mired eternally in its practice of genocide. Perhaps it could learn from Mexico how to become a nation “de mitad y mitad” (77—“a half-breed nation” [76]). These are Bierce’s cynical terms; they come from his former self. But his cynicism may bear hybrid fruit.

The novel virtually opens with the wound between the two sides of the Border. Yet there is a tableau: an exhumation patrol pauses for a moment with a decayed corpse in their arms, and as they blindly meditate on the moment, it is as if “los largos tiempos y los vastos espacios de un lado y otro de la herida [...] venían misteriosamente a morir aquí” (16—“the long spans and vast spaces on both sides of the wound [...] both seemed [mysteriously] to die here” [8]). Both sides of the wound, then, momentarily dissolve their differences, as the patrol feels “la compasión hermana del acto” (16—“an accompanying compassion [the brotherly compassion of the act]” [9]). The Old Gringo had said at the beginning, as Harriet and Arroyo remembered, the worst border is “la frontera de nuestras diferencias con los demás, de nuestros combates con nosotros mismos” (13—“the frontier of our differences with others, of our battles with ourselves” [5]). Can these battles be won, these differences negotiated?

The novel closes with Harriet sitting, reminiscing. Not thinking about how Arroyo did not let her become what she might have been. But thinking that both Arroyo

and the Old Gringo got what they wanted after all, and she blesses them both: “Ah, viejo. Ah, joven” (187—“Ah, old man. Ah, young man” [199]). She has finally, successfully negotiated her crossing. She has achieved a kind of closure by filling the tomb of her missing father (who is perhaps himself still copulating with his mistress somewhere in the tropics of Cuba) with the corpse of the Old Gringo. And she has filled the gaps in her lack, as Faulkner’s Addie Bundren might say, with the Old Gringo’s greatest gift to her—not his body, not his *tiempo*, not his consciousness, but his words, the enabling, creating tools of the verbal artist: “Ella quizá sabía que nada es visto hasta que el escritor lo nombra. El lenguaje permite ver. Sin la palabra todos somos ciegos” (140—“Maybe she knew that nothing is seen until the writer names it. Language permits us to see. Without the word, we are all blind” [146]). This “palabra” is not the *logos* of St. John, the *verbum dei*. It is the material creative word of the poet, of Harriet shaping, bringing into being her memories—of Fuentes’s “ficción.” Nothing, *nada* is seen without it; without it, we are blind to the realities and possibilities of material existence. It can engender meaning, it can negotiate crossings in the very womb of the desert that inevitably will reclaim us all. In this instance, thanks to Fuentes, perhaps we readers can at least momentarily, like the gravediggers in the opening Pietà, achieve that desired state Gloria Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

we are on both shores at once and,
at once, see through serpent and
eagle eyes. (79)

It is a crossing, Fuentes insists, devoutly to be wished.⁹

Notes

¹ For the vexed relationship between Spanish and English versions of *Gringo viejo*, see Gunn and Roy.

² This card to his niece Lora Bierce in October 1913 epitomizes the tropes of Bierce's macabre farewell: "Good-bye—if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia!" (Bierce, *A Sole Survivor* 296). For the most recent account of the problematics of reconstructing Bierce's disappearance, see Morris, *Ambrose Bierce*, ch. 12. Morris notes that one of the elements Fuentes has folded into his fiction is the bizarre story of the assassination of the Anglo rancher in Chihuahua, William S. Benton, for insulting and trying to kill Villa over his lost ranch; Villa apparently ordered his men to exhume the hastily buried body, place it in front of an adobe wall, and riddle it with bullets as if Benson had been executed by firing squad for his attack on Villa. Carranza's blustering about international repercussions if the investigation of Benson continued seems to have stifled this bizarre conclusion to the affair—until Fuentes seized upon it for his novel (Morris 256-58, 266-67). Morris also opines, in piercing Biercian fashion, that the film version of Fuentes's novel, *The Old Gringo*, starring Gregory Peck, Jimmy Smits, and Jane Fonda, "stuffed at the box office" (267). Unfortunately, the film, unlike *Como agua para chocolate*, captures virtually nothing of the novel's sophisticated profundity, ignoring its leitmotifs of mirrors, dreams, and memory.

³ Bierce's father died in 1876, his mother two years later. Concerning his being orphaned, Morris conjectures Bierce's response by quoting from Bierce's infamously diabolically satirical *Devil's Dictionary*, written later, s.v. orphan: "a living person whom death has deprived of the power of filial ingratitude" (Morris 159).

⁴ Going considerably beyond the original, the translation reads, "Do what you conceive to be your duty, sir" (56).

⁵ By choosing to translate "errante" as "ranging" Peden (and Fuentes himself) suppress the connotation of "errant" in the sense of *straying outside proper bounds*.

⁶ By employing the second-person singular in La Luna's speech, I attempt to convey the original's meaning that her refusal to use the more polite, more formal "Usted" is tantamount to her refusal to grant Villa rank and dignity: she knew him when.

⁷ The translation interpolates here the passage "not like you, like another woman I never had"—meaning his mother and making the repressed perhaps too obvious.

⁸ I have taken the liberty of adding quotation marks, omitted in the translation except for the last sentence, for all of what Harriet says; I have also moved that last sentence into the main body of the paragraph instead of making it a separate paragraph, as in the translation.

⁹ For the most thorough and provocative reading of *Gringo viejo* to date, see the article by my colleague Lanin Gyrko.

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